

The Heritage Partnership Initiative

National Heritage Areas

Alan J. Turnbull

In some parts of the country, the settled landscape tells a unique story about the people that live there. Indeed, the natural environment, which caused people to locate in a particular place, contributes to the traditions and cultural values of the people who have lived there. In these places, indigenous ways of using the land have created landscapes that are distinctive and reflective of the cultures that shaped them. The National Park Service (NPS) is developing a program to assist in the conservation of a system of National Heritage Areas—a new way for people to protect what they value about such places. This article presents some of the features that may influence upcoming legislation.

Legislation to enact this program may be considered by Congress in the future. If enacted, the legislation would allow the Department of the Interior to recognize and promote designated heritage areas and facilitate local management efforts. State and local government or private nonprofit organizations would manage individual areas in keeping with local values.

Some examples of National Heritage Areas are the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor (Illinois), the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (Massachusetts and Rhode Island), the Delaware and Lehigh Navigation Canal National Heritage Corridor (Pennsylvania), and America's Industrial Heritage Project (Pennsylvania).

These examples are an *ad hoc* collection rather than a national system; each area was established by Congress, receives funding through the National Park Service, and is managed with the oversight of a local or federal commission. Other areas are promoted as "heritage areas" through a variety of state and local initiatives.

The Heritage Partnership Program

The Park Service is frequently asked to add new units to the national park system. Many proposals, however, involve areas that cannot be administered effectively under the "national park" model. The traditional park model, based on federal land ownership and management, is not effective or appropriate in landscapes that gain their significance from the built environment and the people who live and work there.

The Heritage Partnership Program is a proposal for a national effort to help communities conserve these landscapes in a way that would combine national recognition and support with local management. These areas would be managed by partnerships among federal, state, and local governments as well as private nonprofit organizations. Each area would involve a wide variety of "part-

ners"—federal, state, local, and nonprofit—with a local or regional organization coordinating the contributions of all. The federal role would be to facilitate local actions and recognize and promote the nationally designated areas. Local partners would determine and carry out the type of management that is appropriate to their communities.

The proposed partnership system offers an approach that would meet the needs of local communities without relying solely on federal management and financing. The program would be legislated by Congress and administered by the Department of the Interior.

Establishing a Heritage Area

A community that wishes to establish a heritage area would prepare a feasibility study and a management plan and submit them to the Secretary of the Interior. Technical and financial assistance would be available for preparing these documents; in addition, once management planning is underway, funding might be available for creating certain programs, products, or facilities. The Congress would decide whether to designate any proposed area.

The proposed legislation would designate areas only in response to requests. Areas would be added to the system from time to time through a formal designation process after demonstrating feasibility and after proponents develop a management plan.

The Heritage Partnership Program could provide matching grants and technical assistance for (1) studying the feasibility of designating a proposed area, (2) creating management plans, and (3) undertaking "early action" toward developing programs and facilities once a feasibility study has been completed. The program also could help communities to provide visitors with high quality "interpretation"—communicating the story of their heritage area in an educational and entertaining way.

Program Funding

While no specific funding level is proposed in the legislation at this time, the act would permit federal expenditures for limited functions. The proposal might permit expenditures for:

- 1) small matching grants to fund feasibility studies and creation of management plans;
- 2) "early action" grants for enhancing a heritage area prior to designation (for interpretive programs or facilities);
- 3) matching funds for operation of the local managing entities; and
- 4) operation of the NPS program, including professional technical assistance.

The proposed legislation will avoid new bureaucracy, relying largely on existing mechanisms and staff. Designated areas will be managed by existing state or local governments, or by nonprofit organizations, wherever practical; local heritage area commissions could be established where necessary. The skills and services to be provided by the federal government already exist within the National Park Service.

(Heritage—continued on page 19)

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(*Heritage*—continued from page 9)

Long-term Obligations

The proposed legislation seeks to help heritage areas become self-sustaining. The program itself will last only 25 years unless reauthorized by Congress. In addition, the Secretary can request that Congress withdraw the federal recognition of any area that no longer meets the criteria; that means designated units that don't prove themselves over time can be dropped.

Any Heritage Area Commissions designated by the Secretary would be dissolved after ten years (with a possible extension of five years). By limiting the length of time for which an area may receive federal funds, other areas can be added to the system over time without compounding the total federal expense.

Over the years in which the federal government provides assistance, a heritage area should develop the momentum necessary to exist independently. During this time it will have the opportunity to prove its viability, through attracting visitors, demonstrating economic and cultural value, and building local and state political support. When federal assistance ends, the area would remain a part of the national system, but would be financially and administratively independent.

Public Participation

NPS is making public participation and outreach a top priority as it seeks to respond to the widespread public interest in heritage conservation. The Service has involved a wide constituency and kept all interested parties fully informed during development of this proposal.

Over 2,000 organizations and individuals have received information about the proposal's progress and have been asked for feedback; NPS has convened five public meetings around the country to solicit the public's views and met with every interested organization that has requested information on the proposal.

Please share your ideas with us! Contact the National Park Service, Recreation Resources Assistance Division (782), Washington, DC 20013-7127 (attn: Heritage Partnerships); 202-343-3780.

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